

Hong

7:00 AM

The thud of tiny feet downstairs is my alarm clock. Better than my phone, honestly. More consistent. More chaotic. I roll out of bed, the sheets tangled around my ankles. My room is dim, the blackout curtains doing their job, but I can already hear the morning starting without me.

The house was vibrating.

It wasn't an earthquake, just my four-year-old nephew, discovering that running in circles while holding a plastic lightsaber makes a very specific, very loud thump-thump-thump sound on the hardwood floors.

The house feels full today. My sister is home with her four-year-old tornado of a son, Her husband is away on business—something boring involving spreadsheets and airports—and our parents are in with our grandparents, leaving the house to the "younger generation," as my dad likes to say.

Which really just means I get to be the cool uncle who lets watch cartoons while his mom isn't looking.

I stand in the shower, letting the hot water wake me up. Steam fills the bathroom, smelling of lavender soap. I scrub my face, thinking about the critique today. My painting is wrapped and ready by the door—muted greens, ochres, the tenderness of a figure caught mid-motion. I'm nervous about it. Not because I think it's bad, but because it feels... personal. Like I put too much of myself on the canvas.

I towel off and stand in front of the mirror, running a hand through my hair. It's silver again—freshly dyed last week. I like how it catches the light, how it makes me look a little less like a tired art student and a little more like someone who made a choice.

Usually, mornings were a war zone. But today? The noise felt like energy. It felt like life.

I walked back to my room and started accessorizing..I start the ritual. Rings first—silver on the index, black band on the thumb, the twisted metal one Tui gave me for my birthday on the middle finger. Then the necklace. Then I smooth down my shirt—black, fitted, the kind of "university chic" that says I tried, but not too hard.

My phone buzzed on the bed.

Nut: Morning sunshine, don't die today.

Nut: Don't forget coffee today or you'll bite someone.

I rolled my eyes, smiling.

Me: Shut up. Bring me coffee or don't speak to me.

Me: I never bite. I just glare aggressively.

Then, the second buzz. The one that made my stomach do a weird little flip.

Lego: Good morning P'Hong!! Did you sleep well? I had a dream about pancakes.

I sat on the edge of the bed, towel slipping dangerously low. I angled the camera up, caught the morning light hitting my collarbone, and made a face—tongue out, eyes half-lidded. Click.

Me: Morning. I'm awake. Barely. Pancakes? You're weird.

I hit send, then grabbed my black t-shirt and jeans. I shoved the phone in my back pocket, slung my backpack over one shoulder, and headed for the stairs.

Another buzz.

Lego: [Selfie]

Does this look okay for class? Or too much?

Me: You look perfect. Stop overthinking. Wear it.

The noise hits me halfway down—Something about dinosaurs, the clink of silverware, the smell of toast and coffee. It's loud. It's messy. It's good.

Before my foot even touches the bottom step, a small missile collides with my leg.

"Uncle Hong!" I didn't even see him coming. Just a blur of dinosaur pajamas and sticky hands launching himself at my shins. His arms around my calf, squeezing with surprising strength for someone who still thinks clouds are made of cotton candy.

"Hey, monster." I say, ruffling his hair. "You're up early."

"Mom made pancakes!" He tugs on my pants, trying to drag me toward the kitchen. "Come on! Come on!"

I let him pull me into the kitchen. The morning light is streaming through the windows, turning everything gold. My sister is at the counter, pouring orange juice into glasses. She looks radiant—hair pulled back in a loose bun, wearing one of her husband's oversized shirts, humming along to some pop song on the radio.

"Morning." she says, smiling over her shoulder. "Coffee's hot."

"You're an angel." I tell her, sliding into a chair.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

I ignored it. For now.

"Uncle Hong." the kid said, mouth full of pancake. "Draw me a dinosaur."

"Eat your breakfast first." I said, stealing a piece of bacon from his plate. He kicked my shin under the table.

"Hey!"

"Language." my sister warned, but she was smiling.

I leaned back, sipping the juice, watching them. The house was messy.

I had a lecture in an hour. it felt like everything was exactly where it was supposed to be.

I pulled my phone out under the table.

Lego: I slept like a rock!

I typed back: Weirdo. I'm eating pancakes right now.

I snapped a quick pic of the table—the juice, the messy kitchen, my sister's arm reaching for the syrup—and sent it.

Me: Proof.

Lego: JEALOUS. Save me some!!

I grinned at the screen.

"Who are you texting?" my sister asked, sliding a plate in front of me. "That smile is suspicious."

"Nobody." I said, locking the phone and turning it face down. "Just a friend."

"A friend." she repeated, eyebrow raised. "Right."

"Eat your eggs, woman." I said, and took a bite of pancake.

It was sweet. Just how I liked it. I'm just Hong. Uncle Hong. Student Hong. The guy who's going to ace his critique and then drag his friends to eat something spicy.

I kiss the top of my nephew's head—sticky syrup still on his cheek—and he squeezes my leg one last time like he's trying to glue me to the floor.

“Be good for Mom.” I tell him, ruffling his hair until it sticks up.

He grins, all missing front tooth and pure chaos. “You be good for the art people.”

My sister rolls her eyes from the doorway, arms crossed, still in that oversized shirt. “Don’t let them eat you alive in critique, okay? Text me when you’re done.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I shift the wrapped canvas under my arm, backpack already heavy on one shoulder. “Love you. Both of you.”

“Love you more.” she says, and means it.

I step out before the moment gets too soft. I don’t look back; if I do, I’ll see my nephew’s face pressed to the window and I’ll never leave.

The bus stop is quiet. Just me, a tired office lady scrolling her phone, and the low rumble of traffic. I drop onto the bench, pull out my phone, and open Nut’s chat.

Me: Leaving now. Have a good day at work, you menace.

The three dots appear almost instantly.

Nut: You nervous?

I snort. My thumb hovers.

Me: Yes.

Me: Don’t tell Tui.

Nut: My lips are sealed.

Nut: Kick ass today.

I smile—small, quick, gone before anyone could clock it—and lock the screen.

The bus arrives right on time. I tap my card, find my usual seat near the back, drop the canvas carefully across my lap like it’s made of glass. I fish one earbud out of my pocket, thread it in, and hit play.

The first track is soft—slow acoustic guitar, a voice that sounds like it’s singing from the next room. I lean my temple against the cool window and let the city slide past in soft focus.

Streetlights still on. A dog walker arguing with a leash. An old man feeding pigeons near the park entrance.

Everything moving, everything breathing. My phone buzzes once in my pocket. I don’t check it yet.

The bus jolts over a pothole. My eyes snap open.

We're almost there. The university gates are visible now, iron and stone and too many memories already pressed into them.

I pull the earbud out, wrap the cord around my fingers, and finally check my phone.

Lego: [photo of dance studio mirror, hair's up. shoes on.]

Still feel like I'm going to throw up. Send help.

My thumb moves before my brain catches up.

Me: You're gonna be fine.

Me: Breathe.

Me: Text me when you're done? I'll be out of critique around 11.

I hit send.

I shove the phone back in my pocket before I can watch the read receipt.

The bus doors hiss open.

I stand, canvas under one arm, backpack over the other, silver hair catching the light as I step down onto the pavement.

The campus is waking up—students with headphones, professors with briefcases, the faint smell of coffee drifting from the carts near the main gate.

I take a long breath.

Then I start walking toward the art building, heart loud in my ears, music still faintly playing from the earbud dangling against my collarbone. Today might break me a little. The art building looms ahead. His critique is in an hour. But for now, he just walks.

I push through the heavy glass doors of the art building and the familiar smell hits me first: turpentine, old wood, faintly burnt coffee from the grad-student lounge. It's the same smell every morning, but today it feels sharper, like someone turned the contrast up on the whole world.

Breathe.

I push the door open. Inside it's already half-full, I choose a seat near the back corner, lean the painting against the wall beside me like it's a guard dog I'm not sure I trust. A few classmates glance over, curious, but no one asks to see it yet.

They know better. We all do. You don't show your work until it's time to bleed in public.

The Professor claps once, sharp and final.

"Alright. Let's begin."

The first student stands.

Someone I don't know well—big abstract oils, aggressive reds and blacks. They talk about rage and inherited trauma. The room listens. I listen. When it's my turn, I stand. My legs feel like they're made of something thinner than bone. I unwrap the canvas slowly, deliberately, giving myself time to remember how to speak.

The Professor doesn't smile, but her eyes soften. "Vulnerable work. Thank you, Hong."

I nod once, sit down fast, heart slamming so hard I'm sure the person next to me can hear it.

The rest of the critique passes in a blur.

More paintings.

More words.

The classroom door closes behind him with a soft metallic click. Hong stands in the corridor for three seconds longer than necessary, blinking slowly.

He is still breathing normally.

That feels like the most surprising part.

The door closes behind me with that familiar soft clack.

I keep walking for four or five steps before I realize I'm not holding my breath anymore.

The critique didn't turn into the bloodbath I'd half-prepared for.

No one tore the painting apart. No one asked the kind of questions that feel like someone trying to peel your skin back with the edge of a palette knife.

Instead there were silences that weren't hostile, a couple of quiet nods, and then—right at the end—the professor looked up from his notes and said, almost conversationally:

"Vulnerable work. Thank you, Hong."

Five words.

They landed like someone had gently pressed a warm palm between his shoulder blades.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket while he's still walking. The screen lights up with unread messages he hadn't checked during the critique.

Lego's name is near the top.

A small relieved sound that i doesn't let become a full smile yet.

I type while heading toward the east exit.

Me: Just got out. Heading your way.

I slip the phone back in my pocket and let my shoulders drop another fraction.

I slip the phone back in and walk down the hallway, the familiar hum of campus life around me—students chatting, backpacks thudding against lockers, the faint scent of coffee from the café down the hall. My steps feel steadier now, like I've finally found my footing after a long stumble.

The courtyard is just a few minutes away. I push through the glass doors and immediately spot Lego leaning against the fountain, long dark hair pulled back loosely, wearing a soft gray hoodie with the sleeves rolled up. His posture is relaxed, but I can see the subtle tension in his shoulders—Lego's way of pretending everything's fine when it isn't quite.

"Hey, P'Hong." he says as I approach, his voice light but carrying that quiet warmth I've come to recognize. "You look... better than I expected."

I chuckle, shoving my hands into my pockets. "I survived. Barely."

He grins. "Want to grab drinks? I could use something sweet after today's rehearsal."

"Thought you'd never ask." I reply, my smile widening. "I was thinking iced tea. Something cool."

We fall into step together, the easy rhythm of our steps syncing as we walk toward the nearby café. The conversation flows effortlessly, the way it does with him.

"So," I start, "how bad was the choreography today?"

Lego groans dramatically, dramatizing his exhaustion. "Worse than bad. My legs are still shaking. I swear, the teacher keeps adding new steps like it's a secret torture method."

I laugh, the sound feeling good in my chest. "You always make it sound like you're being asked to do impossible things."

“But I am being asked to do impossible things.” he says, mock-serious. “Like dancing like I’m flying when my brain feels like it’s made of cement.”

I shake my head, smiling. “You’ll get it.”

He glances at me, eyes softening. “Thanks. I needed that.”

We reach the café and order—Lego opting for a mango iced tea, me for a classic green tea. We find a small table near the window, the afternoon sun filtering through the glass, casting a warm glow over us.

As we sip our drinks, I lean forward slightly, my voice low and sincere. “The professor said something today... ‘Vulnerable work. Thank you, Hong.’ It wasn’t just a compliment. It meant something.”

Lego looks at me, his expression quiet, thoughtful. “That’s really good, Hong. I’m proud of you.”

My chest tightens, not with nerves this time, but with something warmer. “Thanks. It felt... personal. Like I put too much of myself out there.”

“You didn’t put too much. You shared something real. That’s not too much. That’s just... you.”

“You always know what to say.”

He shrugs, but there’s a faint pink tinge at his cheeks. “I just mean it.”

The walk to the main street is twenty minutes if you’re moving with a purpose, but with Lego, it’s always closer to thirty. He stops to look at a stray cat, or he points out a mural he hasn’t seen before, or he just slows down because he’s still buzzing from his choreography.

As we turn the corner onto the block where the neon sign for Ink & Ashes hangs, I feel the shift in him.

Lego’s pace falters just a fraction. He starts fixing his hair—the strands that had escaped during the morning are suddenly a major concern. He adjusts the strap of his bag. He’s trying to look casual, but he’s failing spectacularly.

“You know.” I say, keeping my eyes fixed straight ahead, “if you fix your hair one more time, your scalp is going to start bleeding.”

Lego freezes, his hands halfway to his head. “I’m not fixing it. It was just... itchy.”



“Right. Itchy. Usually happens right when we get within fifty meters of Tui’s front door, doesn’t it? Very localized allergy.”

Lego’s face goes from its usual pale to a shade of pink that matches his mango tea. “Shut up, P’Hong. I’m just being neat.”

“You’re being a disaster.” I counter, grinning. “Are you hoping he notices the new earring, or are you going for the ‘exhausted dancer’ aesthetic today?”

“I hate you.” he mutters, but he doesn’t mean it. He swings his bag and catches me lightly on the shoulder. “Stop it. He’s just my boss’s friend. And your boss.”

“And the man you’ve been pining over since the dawn of time.” I add.

Lego hits me again, a little harder this time, his face a full-blown riot of red. “P’Hong! People can hear you!”

“Good. Maybe one of them will tell Tui so we can finally end this tragedy.”

We reach the storefront of Ink & Ashes. It’s a clean, industrial look—black frames, large glass windows. Behind the glass, I spot a flash of brown hair and a black apron.

Tui is at the front counter, probably organizing appointments. He looks up as we approach, and when he sees us, his face breaks into that effortless, warm grin that makes him the mediator of every fight we’ve ever had. He raises a hand in a lazy wave, his eyes lingering on Lego for exactly two seconds too long to be ‘just’ friendly.

Lego waves back, his hand movement small and shy, his previous bravado completely evaporated.

“Go on.” I nudge him. “The flowers won’t sell themselves.”

“I’m going! See you later, P’Hong. Don’t tell him anything stupid!” Lego says, already backing away toward the flower shop doors down. He gives the studio window one last fleeting glance before spinning on his heel and hurrying off.

I watch him go for a second—a small, thin figure with long hair swaying behind him—before I pull open the heavy studio door.

The bell overhead chiming is immediately drowned out by the low, rhythmic hum of a tattoo machine coming from the back rooms. The air here always smells the same: antiseptic, green soap, and expensive coffee.

Tui is leaning against the counter, watching the door. He looks past me, his eyes searching the empty street for a second before they settle back on me. The “disappointment” is subtle—a slight drop in the corner of his mouth, a softening of

his posture—but I've spent my life observing people for art. I don't miss it.

"Hey." Tui says, his voice grounding and calm. "Long day?"

"Not as long as yours is about to be, apparently." I say, tossing my backpack onto the stool near the desk. I gesture vaguely toward the door Lego just vanished through. "Sorry to break it to you, but your favorite customer had to actually go to work today. No lingering at the counter for you."

Tui huffs a laugh, though he doesn't look me in the eye. He starts shuffling some paperwork that was already perfectly organized. "I don't know what you're talking about, Hong. I'm just happy to see you."

"Liar." I say, leaning my elbows on the counter and looking up at him. "You look like someone just told you Christmas was cancelled. You could have at least tried to hide it until I got my bag off."

Tui finally looks at me, shaking his head, a faint flush creeping up his neck. "Get to work, brat. You have a station to prep."

"Sure thing, boss." I say, heading toward my corner of the studio. "But for the record? He fixed his hair three times before we got to the window. You're both pathetic."

I don't stay to hear his response, but as I set up my inks, I hear Tui let out a long, heavy sigh.

Mission accomplished.

The afternoon light slants through the studio windows, catching the dust motes suspended in the air like glitter someone forgot to clean up. I settle into my station, pulling out my sketchbook and the reference photos I'd been working from earlier this week. The familiar ritual of organizing my space calms the last of the post-critique jitters still buzzing under my skin.

Behind me, I hear Tui pacing. Not obvious pacing—he's too composed for that—but the subtle kind. The kind where he pretends to check inventory that doesn't need checking, straightens chairs that are already straight, wipes down surfaces that are already spotless.

I don't look up from my sketchbook. "You know, if you stare at the flower shop any harder, you're going to burn a hole through the glass."

"I'm not staring." Tui's voice is flat. Defensive.

"Sure you're not." I flip to a fresh page, start sketching the outline of a lotus design

a client requested for next week. "You're just... admiring the architecture. The very interesting brick exterior. The way the afternoon light hits the—"

"Hong."

"—the petunias in the window display. Very artistic. I should paint them sometime."

A wadded-up receipt hits the back of my head. I grin, not turning around.

"You're insufferable," Tui mutters, but there's no bite to it. He drops into the chair at the reception desk, spinning it once before stopping himself. "He looked tired today."

I pause mid-sketch. That's not the usual deflection.

"Lego?" I ask, keeping my voice casual.

"Yeah." Tui's voice is quieter now, the teasing energy drained out of it. "Did you notice? The shadows under his eyes. He's been covering them with makeup, but today it wasn't enough."

I set my pencil down and finally turn to face him. Tui is staring at the desk, tracing a scratch in the wood with his fingernail. His jaw is tight in that way it gets when he's worried but doesn't want to admit it.

"I noticed," I say honestly. "He said rehearsal's been brutal. New choreography."

"It's not just that." Tui shakes his head slowly. "He's been picking up extra shifts at the flower shop. And I heard from one of the regulars that he's also doing some modeling gig on weekends now. When does he sleep?"

I don't have an answer for that. The truth is, I've been wondering the same thing. Lego moves through the world like he's made of light—bright smiles, easy laughter, that infectious energy that makes everyone around him feel a little more alive. But lately, if you look closely, you can see the cracks. The way his hands shake when he thinks no one's watching. The bruises on his arms that he waves off as "clumsy dancing." The way his smile sometimes flickers, like a candle fighting against a draft.

"He doesn't talk about it." I say finally. "Not really. He deflects. Changes the subject. Asks about everyone else."

Tui exhales hard through his nose. "That's what kills me. He's so busy taking care of everyone else that he forgets someone should be taking care of him."

The words hang in the air between us.

I watch Tui's face—the furrow between his brows, the way his fingers have stopped moving, the tension in his shoulders. This isn't just casual concern. This is

something deeper, something that's been eating at him for a while.

"So do something about it." I say quietly.

Tui looks up at me, startled. "What?"

"You heard me." I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms. "Stop watching him through windows and sighing dramatically every time he walks by. Actually do something. Talk to him. Ask him how he's really doing. Be there."

"It's not that simple, Hong."

"Why not?"

Tui's mouth opens, then closes. He runs a hand through his hair, messing up the careful arrangement he'd probably spent ten minutes on this morning. "Because I'm... He's only nineteen. I'm twenty-three. And he's so—" He gestures vaguely, like he's trying to capture something intangible. "—bright. He's bright, and I'm just... I don't want to dim that. I don't want to be the reason he stops smiling."

"Tui." I wait until he meets my eyes. "He's already dimming. And it's not because of you. It's because he's carrying too much alone and no one's reaching out to help."

The silence stretches.

Tui's throat bobs as he swallows. "You think I should—"

"I think," I interrupt gently, "that you're so scared of hurting him that you're hurting him by staying away. He looks for you, you know. Every time he walks past the shop. Every time he comes to drop off flowers. He's looking to see if you're watching."

Tui stares at me for a long moment. Something shifts in his expression—fear giving way to something else. Something like resolve.

Before he can respond, the door chimes.

We both look up.

Nut walks in, takeout bags dangling from both hands, a grin plastered across his face. "Delivery! I brought food because I'm an angel and you're all welcome."

He freezes when he sees our expressions.

"Why does it look like someone died?" Nut asks, setting the bags on the counter. "Did I miss the funeral? I didn't bring flowers. Lego has the flowers. Should I get Lego?"

"No." Tui and I say in unison.

Nut's eyebrows shoot up. "Okay, that was creepy. What's happening?"

I stand, stretching, letting the tension in the room dissipate. "Nothing. Tui was just having an existential crisis. The usual."

"Ah." Nut nods sagely. "Love-related?"

Tui groans, dropping his head into his hands.

"I'll take that as a yes." Nut starts unpacking the food—fried rice, spring rolls, some kind of curry that smells incredible. "For the record, I think you should just kiss him already. Put us all out of our misery."

"Nut."

"What? I'm just saying what everyone's thinking." Nut shrugs, popping a spring roll into his mouth. "Life's short. Love is confusing. Spring rolls are delicious. These are the facts."

I snort, grabbing a container of rice. "Profound."

"I'm a philosopher." Nut agrees. "Now eat. And Tui? Figure your shit out before the rest of us lose our minds watching this slow-motion disaster."

Tui doesn't respond, but I catch him glancing toward the window again.

Toward the flower shop. Toward the boy with the long hair and the tired eyes and the smile that's starting to fray at the edges.

I take a bite of rice and pretend not to notice.

But I make a mental note to text Lego later. Just to check in. Just to remind him that someone's paying attention.

Because someone should be.

And if Tui won't step up yet, then I will. At least until he figures out that some people are worth the risk.